Since 2007, our Greek-Italian mission has been studying a sample area near Phaistos employing an integrated and interdisciplinary approach (geomorphology, remote sensing, geophysical and archaeological surveys). We are now able to offer some preliminary results and, at the same time, to sound the potential of broader research susceptible of being systematically extended to all of the western Messara (fig. 1). At the moment, our research on the so-called “palace” of Phaistos has revealed, possibly due to a better knowledge of the materials found there, more consistent documentation of the Hellenistic period. We have identified structures from this period on the three hills (long stretches of the town walls and houses on the Acropolis and in the Palace at San Giorgio in Falandra), on the slopes of the Palace (structures in the “Fiandra” archaeological trial pits, and in Haghia Fatimi and Chalara) and on the surrounding plateau. Necropoleis from this phase are known at Falangari to the north and the village of Poroi to the south. Strabo (X.4.14) informs us that the city was destroyed by nearby Cortina. There is archaeological evidence that this event occurred in the middle years of the 2nd century B.C. A small village on the site of the current village of H. Ioannis replaced the Hellenistic city, as the Geographer of the Augustan age recorded. For the Roman age, only scarce finds have been made in the hills and the plateau of the Hellenistic town. Finds from the Roman period are known since 1894, when Taraselli reports an excavation on the southern slopes of the Chresti Effendi, which revealed a dump of Roman pottery. In the same paper, the author describes a circular basin found about 100 m W of the village of H. Ioannis. It must have belonged to a bathhouse in a Roman villa. Further evidence mentioned by Huawei and Perenna come from the excavation of the Palace since 1981. Among the more significant materials are loom weights bearing the inscription “Bhau”, in the feminine genius, a reference to the god Thise. They are dated between the 1st and 2nd centuries AD. Another significant find is a lamp with a 2nd-century AD inscription. Lamps were also found in the excavations of Chalara, and in H. Fatimi (compartments Thea). These are datable to the 3rd-century AD. Further evidence from the excavation of the Palace includes amphora stamps of the Roman period (fig. 2). Findings from the area to the south and west of Phaistos are documented by surveys by Watrous (Watrous et al. 2004). This brief excursus shows that this part of the area played a significant role, thanks either to the importance of the port of Malata, one of Gortyna’s several ports, or to intense peopling of the area, as documented by rural settlements identified by surface surveys and by tombs and buildings like those uncovered at the Haghia Triada farms (fig. 3).

OUR FIELD SURVEY AND THE VISIBILITY OF THE ROMAN-AGE LANDSCAPE

We conducted a field survey at the western and southern limits of the possible historical settlement of Phaistos (Brondi, Longo et alii 2009). This broad swath, from the southern slopes of Chresti Effendi to the village of Agios Ioannis, was already partly covered by a Greek-American mission in the 1980s. The aim of our project was to define the physical limits of the settlement in the Hellenistic age. We analyzed the terrace and rural landscape in detail, and especially the slopes of Ch. Effendi. The variables of the contemporary landscape are land use, visibility, property lines, roads, and modern geomorphology. These are crucial parameters for the normalization of the density and distribution of archaeological materials. Morphological analysis showed that the finds surface presence is strongly conditioned by erosive phenomena. On this basis, the archaeological material distribution might be misunderstood without a correct valuation of the discovery context.

Our normalized material distribution analysis of early Roman age documents a higher concentration in an area next to and partially coinciding with the present village of Ayios Ioannis, extending over approx. 6 ha (fig. 4). This concentration of sherds seems to confirm what was already observed by Watrous: it bears witness to the existence of a permanent settlement here dating back at least as early as the 1st century A.D. It probably stood along a road to the Gortynian coast. Our trial excavation of 2010 revealed a stretch of this road, with levels of the late Roman period. In the same area is the so-called “Bathhouse”, a partially underground structure. Gerola included it among Venetian monuments, but Sanders and La Rosa more accurately dated it to the Roman period (fig. 5). A survey near the so-called Bathhouse revealed some new outbuildings, a circular structure (possibly a cistern) and, to the east of the Bathhouse, part of a building foundation with a recupero floor (Zone BUR30 – fig. 6). This last evidence suggests that the built-up area in Roman times was much larger than was argued before. The later phases of this period are covered with the so-called Bathhouse. In Area C, above the village of H. Ioannis and near the southern slopes of Ch. Effendi, there are archaeological remains of a farm dating from the 1st to 2nd century A.D., with a spatial distribution of sherds over approx. 1500 sq. m. The rural destination of the area is confirmed by the physical location on the terraces and slopes of Ch. Effendi hill. Strabo (X.4.14) mentions that the village, which apparently had existed in his time, was occupied by the destroyers of Phaistos. To the east of Phaistos, in the wide plain between Mires and Gortyna, there was probably an extensive organization system of the rural space, which certainly provided systematic control of the tortuous course of the river. The variability of climatic conditions and, above all, evidence of land reclaiming works by the inhabitants of post-Minoan Phaistos seem to indicate that the natural hydrography of the area was difficult to manage, as it indeed still is today. Recent core sampling in the south-eastern plain of Phaistos have revealed a marshy layer dating between the 4th and the mid of the 2nd century BC. The swamp was apparently reclaimed concomitantly with the expansion of Gortynian control in the mid-2nd century BC. The more recent layers show no evidence of marshy conditions. Marshland probably occurred again in the Middle Ages, and endured up to the second half of the 20th century AD. The reduction or even disappearance of this tidal-marshy conditions in the western Messara during the second half of the 2nd century BC may be the consequence of extensive land reclamation undertaken by Gortyna as early as Late Hellenistic times and, in my opinion, intensified in early Roman times.

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